Understanding the City from Below

Kampung Peneleh, Surabaya

Adrian Perkasa

Being involved in the SEANNET program brings many privileges for the present writer. Trained as an historian in the undergraduate level, I have an opportunity to leave the parochialism of the discipline. When enrolled in a course called Indonesian Urban History, I was only reading the perspective usually taken by urban planners, governments, or the authorities on the city. In general, they tend to view the urban, especially its settlement, as in need of development, improvement, and even demolition to give new space for more modern forms. On the other hand, having lived in several cities in Indonesia, I hold an understanding that there is something beyond that perspective.

With the community-engaged research model in SEANNET, our group explores different approaches to study urbani9sm, especially in the neighborhood context. Work with the urban sketchers to draw meaningful spaces and activities in local residents’ everyday lives is one example. This activity actually ignited from the idea of the youth who got involved with our research team. However, the sketch drawing program was not only conveying the image of the neighborhood as an important part of the city and inviting more residents to participate; methodologically, drawing itself has potential to be a way of describing the lives we observe and with which we participate. This essay seeks to explore the advantages (and challenges) of the community-engaged research model from our team’s experience studying the urban from the neighborhood. Finally, it suggests that the flexible research model, which accommodated the ideas from below, will be more beneficial for the residents than a rigid, structured, and top-down research model.

What we read before

Kuntowijoyo, a prominent Indonesian historian, wrote in the 1990s on the importance of urban history in Indonesia. In his day, almost all of the professional historians in Indonesia paid more attention to rural regions than urban areas. However, he believed that there are abundant historical sources to write urban history. And these will be upsurging as the cities develop. He also pointed out that the historian could capture the process of urbanism to differentiate his or her works with other scholars studying the city. There are at least five major topics in urban history to study: the city’s ecology, socio-economic transformation, social system, social issues, and social mobility.

The most important reading for the course was Surabaya, City of Work: A Socioeconomic History, 1900-2000 by Howard Dick. Naturally, it is essential because our university is located in that city. Compared to other works on the history of Surabaya, this book enjoyed popularity not only in urban history courses, but also among students in sociology and urban planning departments. For a historian or someone who loves history, Dick recounts the ups and downs of Surabaya’s 20th-century destiny in a series of lengthy, comprehensive, analytic chapters on government, industry, land usage, and commerce.

He characterizes Surabaya’s birth and expansion against the background of its hinterland, giving particular attention to the physical and historical conditions that favored the city over other metropolitan centers on Java. He contends that by the end of the 19th century, Surabaya had emerged as the leading port and most populous city of Java, owing to its privileged access to the interior via the Brantas and Bengawan Solo rivers, as well as to its uniquely sheltered harbor, which made Surabaya far more appealing a port than either Batavia or Samarang. Surabaya evolved into Indonesia’s leading commercial center and one of Asia’s most vibrant and cosmopolitan ports. This was the result of Dutch Colonial policies, particularly the Cultivation System, the Agrarian Law, and the railways built in the second half of the 19th century, which tightened links between the city and its hinterland.

Surabaya was the biggest city in Indonesia at the beginning of the 20th century. With a population of about 150,000 people, it was even bigger than Jakarta. Surabaya rose to prominence in the early 20th century as a result of the processing and transportation of sugar and other agricultural commodities from East Java. The worldwide market was undercut by the 1930s crisis, sending the city into an economic and demographic depression. The city’s economic slump was exacerbated by Japanese occupation, followed by a revolutionary struggle for freedom during the 1940s. In the decolonization period (1945-50), Jakarta thrived as Indonesia’s political capital, while Surabaya remained stagnant as a commercial center.

Indeed, in some chapters, Dick also discusses the existence of kampungs (neighborhoods) to some extent. He explains how the kampung residents rejected the ideas of the Surabaya municipal government in the 1920s. The government aimed to introduce several improvement projects, such as waste disposal regulation and the installment of clean water facilities. The residents disapproved of the city government’s interventions, which they felt were very burdensome. Although this disapproval was not shown in the form of a physical contact or a clash between the residents and the government, it still needed to be settled. Kampung people even called the municipal government (gemeente in Dutch), a government (pemda in Indonesian) that literally means the “cave” that “begs” because their only job is to beg or take money from the people.

Dick’s narrative on that issue sparked me to conduct research in 2017. Compared to the kampung improvement projects, which was initiated in the post-independence period (1945-50), the residents in several Surabaya kampungs felt the improvement projects in the colonial period were better and more beneficial. Many such projects are still in use today. For example, many kampung people still use public bathrooms that were constructed during the colonial period. The closed gutters or sewage systems built on each side of kampung roads were considered another positive outcome. The residents believe that the system could prevent their kampungs from flooding. In addition to that, they say that the colonial intervention paid more respect to the several sacred sites in the kampungs, while the post-independence projects tended to neglect their existence.

Collecting historical sources related to kampung improvement programs was the first and most crucial step, which we relied on oral history of the kampung residents. Oral history, the interviewing of five people about their kampungs, was another one of the most important tools in the historian’s toolbox for researching the very recent past. In principle, there is no better way to acquire an understanding of events in living memory than to speak with those who saw or participated in them. People interviewed, unlike written sources, may be asked precise follow-up questions about their experiences and opinions, depending on what the historian wants to investigate or uncover. Interviewing living history provides us a critical truth that underpins all excellent works of history: history is a narrative about real people, with all the depth and nuance that human reality implies. Nevertheless, many urban planners found Dick’s Surabaya more useful for them perhaps because it is in line with Louis Wirth’s idea on the history of the city. Wirth believed that history is a linear and progressive unfolding of the liberating power of reason and science. According to Wirth, at the beginning, there was a neighborhood or a community before the emergence of a society. Moreover, the neighborhood as a traditional type of social organization would go away as society became increasingly secular, impersonal, and metropolitan. The narrative of Surabaya history provided by Dick is similarly written in a linear way and gives no place for the role of
What we are doing in SEANNET (2017-Present)

Almost all of the SEANNET project objectives are consistent with Wirth’s ideas on the lack of consciousness in the proposed methodology, the program sets out to question the everyday nature of urbanization processes in Southeast Asia by asking what Wirth defined as “old” in the urban mosaic. Instead, he is interested in the everyday nature of urbanization processes. In Southeast Asia, this everyday nature is often embodied in the structures and spaces of the kampung, which is a neighborhood association.

The notion of neighborhood refers to both built and social environments. If the city at its smallest, most local levels, this will have profound consequences for Southeast Asia. In the 20th century, it was not just for their cities but more broadly for their national and regional lives, as well. Careful study and engagement with the local residents of neighborhoods are therefore necessary to better understand the current urbanization of neighborhoods are therefore necessary to better understand the current urbanization of Southeast Asian cities in Southeast Asia, the city is not a unitary whole but is made up of many parts, each with its own specific cultural and historical identity. The study of history is not, therefore, a local enterprise, but one that requires a broader perspective. The study of history is not, therefore, a local enterprise, but one that requires a broader perspective.

Embarking on this research, we first delved into the essentially spontaneous realms of cultural production. In small-scale, neighborhood-level research, we often find that the local self-contained neighborhood is not a unitary whole but is made up of many parts, each with its own specific cultural and historical identity. The study of history is not, therefore, a local enterprise, but one that requires a broader perspective.

What we (tentatively) conclude

At this point, we are inclined to repeat the historian Theodore Roszak’s ideas on the failure of technocracy or top-down approaches in studying urbanism. Roszak coined a term that he called “citadel of expertise.” In their citadel, the experts, including urban studies scholars, have created a new mythology in the name of science. They have a sophisticated methodology called systems analysis. According to Roszak, systems analysis represents an expansion of scientific techniques into the essentially spontaneous realms of community development. This analysis distrusts people’s attention from their real problems of existence. In the guise of liberating urban community from myth, religion, and ritual, the urban technocracy just replaces the old ones with a new set of quasi-religious symbols and rituals. These act as masks, concealing the real purpose of life. Forcing people out of town, for example, becomes an urban renewal project.

In the perspective of urban history, we are in line with Richard Sennett’s idea on the non-linear narrative of cities. According to Sennett, cities can be no return to the local self-contained neighborhood. We engage with local residents about what is to be done in the near future. We carefully evaluate our steps to prevent the dangers of research blueprints that serve only our side rather than serving the local interests.

Adrian Perkasa, Local Principal Investigator, SEANNET Surabaya team. Email: adrianperkasa@fas.unair.ac.id or a.perkasa@umk.unair.ac.id

Notes

3. Adapting a methodology from SEANNET, my research team must really care about the well-being of the area and be honest in their desire to learn heartily. This is not about romanticizing community-engaged research; rather, concern for the well-being of the area and the genuine needs of research is paramount. The study team members need reciprocity of intents, which is returned by the community comprehending the study. Such connections allow for the expansion of knowledge-building from and by communities.

Fig. 2 (right): The board members of the neighborhood association of Surabaya residents, and young children discuss the plan to make a map of Kampung Peneleh together with the University of Liverpool’s student and community architect and fig. 3 (right): The neighborhood map.

Fig. 3 (right): The map of Kampung Peneleh with the local residents, and young children discuss the plan to make a map of Kampung Peneleh. (Both photos by Komik Miret, Community Architect of Surabaya).